

815 AREA CODE

Answers To Frequently Asked Questions Concerning The Need For A New Area Code In The Territory Now Served By The 815 Area Code

Q: Why is the Illinois Commerce Commission holding public forums to discuss the potential need for a new area code in the 815 area code?

A. The Commission was notified by a representative of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that the 815 area code is nearing “exhaustion”. This means that, according to the FCC’s representative, the 815 area code is running out of telephone prefixes, and there soon may not be prefixes available for new telephone companies to offer services to their customers. The public forums are being held to discuss whether residents of the 815 area code would prefer a “split” or an “overlay” when it is determined the 815 area code is exhausted.

Q. Please explain the difference between an area code, a prefix and a telephone number.

A. For (815) 254-3456, the “area code” is 815, the “prefix” is 254 and the “telephone number” is (815) 254-3456.

Q. Who decides whether a new area code is needed?

A. The Federal Communications Commission ultimately is responsible for the administration of area codes. However, it has authorized the Illinois Commerce Commission to assist in determining whether a new area code is necessary and, if so, how it should be implemented.

Q. Does the Commerce Commission understand that most residents of the present 815 area code do not want a new area code?

A. Yes. The Commerce Commission will make every effort to forestall the introduction of a new area code in the 815 area as long as possible. However, the Commerce Commission has relatively limited authority to do this. The Commerce Commission has been a national leader in attempting to forestall the need to new area codes. For instance, it was able to prevent the introduction of a new area code to the 847 area for more than four years.

Q. What are the possible alternatives available to the Commerce Commission for establishing a new area code if it eventually is determined a new area code is needed?

A. The Commerce Commission could decide to “split” the area covered by the present 815 area code or it could “overlay” the area with a new area code.

Q. What is the difference between “splitting” an area code and an “overlay”?

A. When an area code is “split”, the geographic area of the existing area code is divided or “split” into 2 separate area codes. One geographic area continues to use the existing area code and the other geographic area receives a new area code. The telephone users served by the new area code must change their telephone number to reflect the new area code. Calls within each of the area codes (i.e., the “old” and the “new” area codes) would continue to be made by dialing 7 digits, just as they are today. Calls to points outside each area code would be made by dialing (1+) 10 digits, just as they are today.

With an “overlay” the new area code would cover or “overlay” exactly the same geographic area that the 815 area covers. If you have an existing 815 area code telephone number, your telephone number would not change. Telephone companies that do not have numbers or do not have enough numbers in the 815 area code likely would provide new customers with the telephone numbers of the new area code. Therefore, if your home or business receives new service from a company that has been assigned a prefix from the new area code, it is possible that you would receive a telephone number with the new area code. All telephone calls within the old and new area codes, regardless of distance, must be dialed using (1+) 10 digits.

Q. What are the major disadvantages of a split or an overlay?

A. If a split is implemented, roughly 50% of the phone users in the current 815 area code must change their telephone numbers to reflect the new area code. This usually entails substantial expense to individuals and businesses that are assigned the new area code for business and/or residential users may have to print new letterheads, change business cards, change signage etc. Cellular telephones usually must be returned to the services provider for programming the new area code into the phone set. Also, the split usually does not occur along normal county, township or community boundaries.

With an overlay, while existing 815 customers keep their current telephone numbers, they must dial (1+) 10 digits for all calls, even for calls to their next-door neighbor.

Q Why would I have to dial 11 digits if there were an “overlay”?

A. The FCC mandates (1+) 10-digit dialing for all overlay area codes. In a recent letter to the Illinois Commerce Commission, the FCC stated “We find that compliance with the (1+) 10 digit dialing rule is necessary to further the FCC’s national number administration and numbering resource optimization goals.”

Q. If an overlay were initiated and I must begin dialing (1+) 10 digits, will this affect my long distance charges?

A. No. Calls that are local remain local, and calls that are long distance remain long distance. The charge for placing a call depends upon the distance between the 2 parties, not the number of digits dialed to reach the person.

Q. Aren’t there millions of unused telephone numbers in the 815 area code?

A. Yes. Due to technological limitations, historical patterns of use, and the outdated rules supported by federal regulators and the telephone industry, the system by which numbers are issued allows huge inefficiencies to exist which is why the 815 area code can be “exhausted” when less than 30% of the telephone numbers are actually in use.

Q. What are “stranded” telephone numbers?

A. A telephone “prefix” (block of 10,000 telephone numbers) can only be associated with a single town or “rate center”. If a rate center needs fewer than 10,000 numbers, those numbers not in use are considered “stranded”. Even though there is no need for them in the particular rate center where they’re assigned, there is no means by which they can be used anywhere else. In area code 815, there are 88 small towns with only 1 prefix assigned. That in turn, equals 880,000 telephone numbers. However, of those, only 115,000 numbers are actually being used. The remaining 765,000 numbers are “stranded”.

Q. Why isn't there a special area code for pagers and wireless phone numbers?

- A. The Illinois Commerce Commission urged the FCC to allow "technology specific" area codes as early as 1995 which could have been implemented throughout the state to meet the capacity needs of wireless and pager service providers. The FCC for fear that it would be discriminatory towards pager and wireless providers rejected this approach.

Q. Why may a new area code be needed?

- A. The recent proliferation of second telephone lines and other telecommunication services, including wireless, faxes, modems, pagers, and the increasing communication needs of small and large businesses and the increases in the general population has led to the exhaust of numbering resources. Recently the FCC's representative notified the Commission that only a few new prefixes are available in the 815 area code for customers of those telecommunications companies attempting to provide new services. Therefore, the possibility of a new area code in 815 is being discussed.

It should be noted that the 815 area code is not running out of individual telephone numbers. It is running out of prefixes - the 3 digits "254" in the telephone number (815) 254-3456.

Q. When is an area code "exhausted"?

- A. An area code "exhaust" usually is determined by how many prefixes are available to assign to telephone companies, not how many telephone numbers are being used. A phone company must have a different prefix for each rate center where it offers service. Each prefix has roughly 10,000 numbers. Even if a telephone company only has 100 customers in a rate center, without Number Pooling there is currently no way to allocate telephone numbers to it in increments of less than 10,000 telephone numbers.

For example, if a telephone company wants to begin serving 100 customers in a rate center it will receive a prefix that contains - 10,000 telephone numbers. Its customers will be assigned 100 numbers and 9,900 numbers would not be used. Those 9,900 numbers are referred to as "stranded" numbers, meaning that they are not in use but cannot be used by any other company or in any other rate center of the 815 area code. These "stranded" numbers account for a large percentage of the unused telephone numbers.

Q. What is a Rate Center?

- A. A rate center is a specific geographic area that defines where customers are calling *from*, and where customers are calling *to*. Rate centers and their boundaries were established in the 1940s as a way of measuring the distance between calling points for billing purposes. Each prefix is uniquely associated with a rate center. For example, a person in Joliet will have a different prefix than a person in Kankakee and when the person in Joliet places a call to a person in Kankakee the caller will be billed according to the distance between those two “rate centers”. There are 198 different rate centers in the 815 area code. As noted, until number pooling is in effect, a telephone company that wants to provide new service in 815 is assigned a prefix (roughly 10,000 telephone numbers) for each “rate center” that it wants to serve.

Q. What is Number Pooling?

- A. Number Pooling is a technology that allows phone companies to “share” a prefix within a rate center. Companies can receive telephone numbers in blocks of 1,000 telephone numbers, instead of blocks of 10,000 telephone numbers.

For instance, without Number Pooling, the telephone company would receive a block of 10,000 numbers that run from, say, (815) 254-0000 to 254-9999. With Number Pooling, the carrier would get a block of one thousand telephone numbers from, say, (815) 254-3000 to 254-3999. The FCC controls the availability of Number Pooling.

Q. Isn't Number Pooling being introduced in the 815 area code?

- A. Yes, but only in a portion of the 815 area code. Specifically, beginning in June 2002, that portion of the 815 area code that resides within the Chicago MSA (Metropolitan Statistical Area) will be among the first areas in the nation to have number pooling implemented under the FCC's national program. The FCC has not mandated Number Pooling in all of the 815 area code.

Q. What has the Commerce Commission done to encourage Number Pooling?

- A. Illinois was a pioneer in the use of number conservation measures, including Number Pooling. Commerce Commission-initiated Number Pooling helped delay the need for a new area code in Illinois' 847 area code for 4 years.

Recently the 2 largest telephone companies that serve the area, Verizon and Ameritech, voluntarily agreed to participate in number pooling in all of the areas that they serve. The ICC has contacted the other twelve independent companies that serve portions of 815 and asked them to participate as well. If 100% participation can be achieved, the effectiveness of number pooling will be maximized.

Q. What is Local Number Portability?

- A. The ability to port or carry your telephone number from your current local telephone carrier to another local carrier in your exchange. As an example, if you decide you want to use a different telephone company to provide you with local telephone service for your home or business, you likely would want to continue to use your current telephone number. Therefore, you would want to “port” or carry your telephone number to your new local phone company. Number Portability allows you to do this. The telephone companies’ switches must be capable of Local Number Portability in order to implement Number Pooling.

Q. Are wireless carriers regulated by the Illinois Commerce Commission?

- A. No. The Commerce Commission does not regulate wireless carriers and wireless companies do not face the same Number Pooling and Number Portability requirements of wire line companies. The FCC regulates wireless carriers, and under current FCC regulations wireless carriers are scheduled to implement Number Pooling and Number Portability by November 2002.

Q. Are new area codes being introduced in other states as well as in Illinois?

- A. Yes. More than 120 new area codes have been introduced in the United States since 1996. Of those, about 28 have been overlays and most of the rest have been splits. In January 2002 a “new” 224 area code was overlayed over the “old” 847 area code in North Eastern Illinois.

The 815 area code was established in 1947. It was one of the original 86 area codes established in the United States.

